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DEPARTURE

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The clock had to stop. Tomorrow must never come. Unimaginable to think that–then I would soon be gone. I breathed in the shape of the rooms, the form and color of the furniture, the sound of the voices, even that of Luise answering the telephone in the pantry. A tap at the door, and Luise's head popped out like a Jack in the box. A scraggly gray bun sat atop of it; her face, creased as rumpled paper, smiled, but her eyes were heavy with concern. "Telephone, *Herr Doktor*," her head drew back. Even dowdy old Luise, never my ally in now forgotten skirmishes with my mother, was dear at this moment. Alice, ever my real friend, had had to leave –too young to work any longer in a Jewish household.

`"What is it, Martin?" my mother let the knitting slide, and the ball of wool roll to the floor as my father returned to his armchair. The same throb of panic crept into her voice as on those nights in November when a ring at the front door would sent my father scurrying to hide in the cellar.

"Will there be any trouble?"

"No, it's cleared with the authorities. The organizing committee just wants the Kindertransport to leave at six instead seven. It's a regular train, but fewer people will be

around." He lit his cigar again. "We'll just have to get up before five.

The paintings, the furniture, the lamps in the adjoining rooms beckoned. Much later in New York when I came to writing down my memories I would recall that last evening's coolness of the dining room wall against my hot palm and see again the painting over the sideboard.

In it, a girl strode down a tree-lined road away from a red roofed house. Loosely tied over her dark brown coat, a yellow scarf flapped in the wind. I wanted her to change places with me. Would she? She was set on staying. Well, let her!

My father's study lay to the left. My parents sat there as they had done every evening of my life. My father put his cigar back into his mouth as he turned a page, my mother's forehead creased into two thin lines as she bent her head over her reading, or as at this moment, knitting away at a sweater for me that she would later bring to England. Just to fling my arms around them, beg them to let my stay was all I wanted. For so long now, the Nazi regime had made life difficult for them yet they had stayed on. Kristallnacht and its aftermath, no one had come to fetch my father---at least not yet. They must understand that nothing mattered except our staying together as we were now here in this room.

Why upset them? They wanted me to leave – to get me out of harm's way, away from the dread. My mother would soon follow, they said. Any day she would get a British permit to work as a domestic. My father-- too much the lawyer to be of any use in a household--was hoping to go to some far away place like Buenos-Aires. Barely ten years old, I could make no sense out of these plans, only knowing that I was leaving forever.

I bent over my father, trying to find a patch between his glasses and his cigar to kiss. Perhaps I had been right then to feel that we would never be together like this again.

"Don't forget to take your watch and alarm clock." His brown eyes brushed over me. "You'll need to reset them tomorrow evening to English time."

My mother took my hand, and held it to a cheek so hot it burned itself into my palm. "I'll be up soon to hear your prayers and kiss you good night." Fastening the last stitch of my knitting, my mother added, "And to close your suitcase."

Lit by my bedside lamp, the blue and white bedspread and curtains of my bedroom drew me in. While setting the alarm clock on the bedside table, my thumb got caught in the thin gold chain of a charm bracelet. A little gold rabbit with a bulging tummy and upright ears now lay in the palm of my hand. I must put it back. The instructions permitted no valuables. Otherwise every one on the Kindertransport might be at risk. Yet how to part from the little rabbit. I loved it more than the other charms: the chimney sweep, the four leafed clover, more than the heart. To leave it behind--unthinkable. A gift from my grandmother, it spoke of her shimmering white hair, her quiet, dignified, and comforting presence. I almost chipped the nail off as I removed it from the bracelet.

When my mother came to bid my good night, I would have told her about the charm but for the hot lump in my throat. Instead I said my prayers aloud in the way she liked:

Lieber Gott, pure let me be,
So that I can dwell in Thee.

She kissed me on the forehead, and turned off the lamp. Her slim, tall figure

glided through the room and merged with the doorway.

The rabbit charm still pressed into the palm of my hand. It was throbbing as if alive. I turned toward the wall and pressed it against my cheek. Nothing was going to separate me from it.

The early morning mist cast a thin veil over the final steps down to the garden, over the ride by taxi through the silent city. It was a scene that later remained beyond recollection, only to be recreated.

Dusted with snow, the stone elephants stood by the entrance gate to the zoo as if they part of last night's dream. The taxi sped past the heavy apartment houses that lined the deserted streets. Flags rolled down from the public buildings to either side of *Unter den Linden*. The coating of ice on the steps leading up to the Opera House reflected the light of the street lamps. Here I had come with my father to see the Christmas pantomime--a different fairy tale each year. Never again. I gripped my mother's hand more tightly.

The darkness of a late winter dawn pushed against the big station hall as parents with their children streamed in from the cold. The hall was strangely quiet. No one wanted to draw attention to the departure of the Kindertransport. After all, this was a regular train. Fifty, sixty children--some of them around my age, many already in their teens--moved around the hall looking for friends, or talking quietly to their parents. I still see myself standing there with my parents in that crowd of people.

A flash of brown. It must be Marianne. Yes, there she was. But that pale lady with her, could that really be Mrs. Levy, her eyes hidden by a big, black hat? And where was

Marianne's father? I scanned the moving throng, trying in vain to catch her eye. Well, I would just have to try to find her later on.

A man waving a megaphone began calling out the name. The children lined up; counselors handed out nametags. Now my name, "Irene Katzenstein," rang out clearly.

For a moment the sound of voices was stilled. The crowd became shadowy. My father's moustache grazed my cheek as he bent down to kiss me. I wanted to clutch the lapels of his coat, to cling to them. My eyes fastened on every line in my mother's face as my mother swept my up in my arms, and pressed me so tightly to her chest that I thought both my heart would crack. If she murmured something about seeing me in London next month, I overheard it.

Here on this station I was leaving them for ever, or so it felt to me. A whiff from my father's cigar and the fragrance of my mother's perfume held me in their spell. An energetic young counselor, a yellow scarf around her neck, almost had to pull me into the line that wound its way toward the train track. Children were already climbing up into the cars. The rabbit charm began to move in my coat pocket. What if brisk Lottie were to find it and send me back home, or if an SS officer were to detect it during the customs inspection? At that moment it began to swell.

Pushing my way into the crowded train, I kept its plump mass firmly between my thumb and forefinger. An empty seat next to a boy in short leather pants appeared. The train started with a backward jerk. The grimy factories that skirted the city began to rush past the window. My eyes began to close, but the high voice of the boy roused me again.

"Our liner is the Manhattan." He pushed the cloth cap on his head to a rakish angle. "You'll see. I'll find a place to hide and go all the way to New York." He juggled

some large shiny glass marbles—the kind I liked--in his hand and again turned to an older boy seated opposite. "Then one day I'll go to Hollywood. Just wait, if you were ever to see me in a movie, you wouldn't even recognize me."

"Forget it. Stop making up fairy tales." The older boy paused and smoothed the center crease in his long pants. "Well, if our parents get their visa to *Amerika."* He sighed. "But who knows?"

Their words made me think of my own parents. Were they home yet? The china cups might be steaming with hot coffee, my place at the breakfast table empty. My eyes clouded over; my stomach lurched as the train veered around a curve. Puffs of smoke from the train's engine spun upwards into the lightening sky to the east.

By late afternoon, a bus was taking us through Hamburg to the SS Manhattan. I pressed my nose against the window and watched the walls of buildings along the street go by.. I turned to Marianne next to me, asking her why her father had not been at the station. Marianne spoke of the shot that had echoed through her home late one evening shortly before the New Year. The Gestapo had come back to fetch her father even though he had only just been released--his head shorn, his face gaunt, his eyes circled with pain. Detained on Kristallnacht, he had spent a month in Sachsenhausen, a concentration camp near Berlin. Then he heard them pounding at the front door again. He could bear it no more, and raised his gun to his temple. His funeral took place on New Year's Day. Marianne fell silent.

My eyes glued themselves on to the street outside. The row of shops along it sent its yellow light out into the dusky air. On this as on any other evening, people stopped to

look and point at the displays in the windows. Did they know what was happening?

The Kindertransport bus stopped at a building. SA. border guards stood at the entrances. The light streaming out of the windows hit my face. It sharpened the pain above my left eye. The rabbit in my pocket began to tingle between my fingertips. Leaving the bus, I pushed myself forward to keep up with the others.

As I was to recollect later in life the children filed into a long hall. We knew what to do: go to the table that displayed the first letter of our last name; take the exit permit that Lottie and the others would hand us, and submit it to the official at the table. He would stamp it, and hand it back to us. Of course, the official might decide to question us, even search the suitcases, but then our brisk young counselor, would be there to help.

Instructions blared over the loudspeaker and innumerable lamp bulbs on the long stretch of low white ceiling burned down. My suitcase grew heavier as I inched my way toward the rows of officials seated behind long wooden tables.

The voices, the rustling of paper, the smell of dust and perspiration was dizzying; the glare of the naked lights hit my forehead. I could barely see and covered my eyes. Leaning against a nearby doorway, I waited for the pounding in my forehead to pass.

Opening my eyes again, I stepped into another place in the file. It was not the same line. A group of middle-aged couples surrounded me. Where had the other children gone? Alarmed, I thought of my parents. Would they be here? Where they still at home? I must find a telephone, to call them up, make sure that they were all right. The image of Marianne's father hit my mind.

The gruff voice of the official at the table jolted me back. "What is this child doing here?"

The people in the line turned to stare. I felt hedged in by a circle of questioning, anxious faces. They were all strangers.

The official turned to an assistant. I heard him say, "Get this child out of the way!"

The pain in my head seemed to burst. I took the rabbit out of my pocket and squeezed it for comfort. It was turning into a pulsating lump. The two customs officials were staring right at it.

A heavy tap on my shoulder sent a quiver through me and the rabbit plummeted to the floor. Not daring to pick it up, I turned my head, and found myself staring at the yellow scarf around Lottie's neck. She seemed about to slap me. Instead she shook me by the shoulders.

"Come on, you should be over there with all the others on the Kindertransport line."

I held back and stooped to search for the little rabbit. I could not just abandon it there amidst the dust, papers and cigarette ends that littered the floor. Yet it was Lottie who saw its glimmer, scooped it up and handed it back to I, saying "Come on now, put away that silly little trinket. Let's go!"

The rabbit in my hand once more, I saw how tiny it really had been all the time. I stowed it in my coat pocket, knowing that it would be all right now. Taking Lottie's hand, I followed her into the right line.

The smell of the sea drifted towards us as we children threaded our way through the crowd. In front of us, a wall of lighted portholes stretched into the dark sky. I drew back.

It seemed as if a row of huge Berlin apartment houses had floated down the river to pursue us. Or was this still Berlin? . I stared hard at the cold bright lights, willing them to change, to turn back into the shining portholes of the steamer, longing for the vessel to set sail. Then I grasped the railing, and let the gangway pull me up.